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Verifying nuclear pacts

Soviet offer to allow on-site plant inspections important, but hurdles remain for arms control

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Washington

The Soviet offer to allow international inspection of nuclear power plants could have significant implications for arms control, particularly since it fits a recent pattern of such offers.

In the past, the Soviet Union has agreed in principle to on-site visits from foreign inspectors, who would check compliance with arms control pacts. But such inspectors have never actually set foot on Soviet territory. Haggling over details has gotten in the way.

The plants the Soviets have now agreed to open are not particularly sensitive, administration officials say. But they note this marks the first time the USSR has allowed on-site inspection of any nuclear facility.

Thus the move "is an important step," says State Department spokesman Bernard Kalb.

Arms control agreements are unique contracts. With no international arms police to enforce them, superpowers must somehow verify that their potential nuclear adversary is living up to its end of the bargain.

Verification of current pacts, for the most part, depends on "national technical means" — photos from reconnaissance satellites and aircraft, seismic sensors, and other spy data. Though extremely sophisticated, such means do have their limits.

For example, the Threshold Test Ban Treaty of 1974 limits signatories to underground nuclear tests with a yield of 150 kilotons or less.

The US monitors Soviet nuclear tests with a sophisticated system of seismic measuring devices, called the Atomic Energy Detection System. But it has no definitive detail on the rock underlying the main Soviet test

site in Central Asia. This means the US is not sure its instruments are correctly calibrated, according to administration sources cited in the authoritative publication *Defense Week*.

US intelligence estimates of Soviet test yields could thus be off by as much as a factor of two. There is a slight chance a Soviet blast rated by the US at 150 kilotons is actually 75 kilotons — or 300 kilotons, which would be a violation of the treaty.

Administration officials claim such uncertainties can be cleared up only by allowing outside inspectors into test sites. Last week, President Reagan offered to let a team of Soviet experts measure a US nuclear test in Nevada.

The Soviets, for their part, the same day announced a five-month moratorium on nuclear weapons testing. The US has declined to join the USSR in this step. President Reagan at a press conference this week said such mutual action would leave the Soviets ahead of the US in weapons development.

"There are always going to be these great things we have to develop," complains David Morrison, a senior research analyst at the Center for Defense Information. "At some point we've got to get off the treadmill."

The inspection of two Soviet reactors is not directly related to last week's superpower posturing on weapon testing. The inspections are to be conducted by officials of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Their purpose will be to ensure that the electric power plants are not being used for military purposes.

On Tuesday, an IAEA spokesman in Vienna confirmed that the visits will take place but said final details must still be ironed out.

Analysts note that there is a propaganda component to this Soviet move. The USSR is expected to officially announce the inspections at the nuclear nonproliferation treaty review conference, which begins later this month.

But the recent action also fits into a general pattern, with the Soviets gradually moving closer to allowing on-site inspection of military installations.

"The Soviets are moving in the right direction," says Michael Krepon, senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

During the Carter presidency, the USSR agreed to allow "black box" seismic detectors on its territory, for purposes of verifying a comprehensive test-ban treaty. Negotiations on such a treaty, however, collapsed over other details.

At the ongoing Mutual Balanced Force Reduction talks in Europe, the Soviets have also now agreed to more on-site inspections for conventional military forces, notes Mr. Krepon.

On-site calibration of instruments would probably be necessary for any sort of test ban treaty the US and USSR might reach in the future, concedes one academic expert who strongly supports such a treaty.

But on-site visits would also be a great help in verifying any agreement on offensive arms reduction reached at the current Geneva arms talks, notes this source.